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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to show the effect that participation in workplace committees has on committee members. The subjects were 34 members of Workplace Education Center (WEC) projects of ABC Canada who work on establishing and maintaining workplace literacy initiatives; they were interviewed by phone or in group discussions. The study found that, overall, committee members used their participation in this research as an opportunity to re-think important issues and refine further their approach to a collaborative process. For some members, the WEC committee work began a new way of thinking and acting on a number of workplace issues: literacy, job training, investigation of concerns, involvement of employees, the steps in project planning, and the sources and uses of power in organizations. Benefits to committee members included the following: increased knowledge about and skills for process and project work and working with others in a new style of teamwork, a boost of confidence, and an awareness of the issues that challenge an organization. Benefits to the organization included increased worker skills and a better attitude throughout the company. Challenges to the team members included the teamwork process, literacy issues, time and perseverance, and the roles and relationships of senior management. (KC)

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The Benefits of Participating in Collaborative Committees

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The Benefits of Participating in Collaborative Committees

By Mary Ellen Belfiore

ABC CANADA is a joint initiative of business and labour, supporting the development of a fully literate Canadian population. We focus on public awareness programs and helping the private sector to establish workplace basic education programs.

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I. One Experience Among Many

I got jaded after five years in the program, always dealing with problems and thinking about problems. [During the collaborative process] I got another perspective and an opportunity to reflect on what people appreciated in the program - what the program meant for them. It made me rethink and listen to their values.

If we had that kind of community support earlier, it could have been a different program.
(Committee member in a WEC evaluation project)

The collaborative process brightened this committee member's sagging spirits. In finding out what a long-term education program had meant for his community, he discovered what he had lost sight of over the years. He also discovered that making community participation central to the investigation, the reporting and the recommendation process yields many riches.

In this brief report we have researched what the collaborative process has meant to the individuals, companies and unions we have worked with over the last three years. We thank them for their participation in our project, especially for their insights and inspiration. Their comments accompany the text.

Mary Ellen Beltione
Workplace Education Centre
ABC CANADA
1997

II. Introduction to the Report: Our Purpose and Methods

The Workplace Education Centre (WEC) of ABC CANADA initiates, plans and carries through on projects in collaboration with workplace committees. We are committed to a process of shared decision-making and action which depends on the full engagement of all committee members. Committees have representation from all levels of the organization; in unionized workplaces, union and management are equally represented at the table.

As consultants we work closely with the committees in a process which leads them to examine basic skills issues and take action to improve education, communication and training at their workplaces. Throughout the process we have seen an increase in the awareness, skills and responsibilities of many committee members.

A. Purpose of the Report

An opportunity to make a difference in the company

The purpose of this brief report is to show the effect that participation in workplace committees has on committee members. We focus on the benefits of participation in in regard to work activities as well as personal growth. In other words, what do people gain professionally and personally from being members of a workplace planning committee? This report is not an evaluation of the committee process, a summary of its strengths and weaknesses, or a set of recommendations for improvement. Rather, it is a descriptive piece on the positive impact of participation.

B. Why This Research is Important

It's been wonderful for me. I wouldn't have missed it for the world.

Since this process of collaborative committee work is integral to WEC's approach, we should be able to point to commonly stated benefits resulting from participation. Committee members are asked to contribute many hours of creative planning time and companies are responsible for providing backup and other financial support so members can perform committee tasks. This report documents specific incentives for companies, unions and employees to make these commitments of time and money.

Such a long project usually fizzles out but not here. It goes on. The individual experience and the good relations keep it rolling.

We hope this research will be useful not only to WEC consultants but also to other workplace educators in explaining, negotiating and encouraging the use of collaborative committee work in setting up basic skills education programs.

C. Methods for Gathering Information

We used two methods to gather information from committee members whom WEC has worked with over the last two years:

- 15 to 30 minute phone interviews with key members of the committees including the chair or co-chairs and one or two other members
- survey of members of committees we were currently working with through an informal group discussion

I interviewed 19 committee members individually. In addition, two committees (15 people in total) were at an appropriate stage in their committee work to participate in group discussions. In total, 34 committee members contributed to the findings.

III. Findings

A. Overall Comments

Overall, committee members were pleased to be part of our research and, in at least half of the cases, they used the opportunity to rethink important issues and refine further their approach to a collaborative process. Members' enthusiasm, especially in these latter interviews, was heartening since it reflected a positive and beneficial experience which touched other parts of their personal and professional lives.

It can't be stressed enough: the more they include the union, the more they succeed.

For some members, the WEC committee work began a new way of thinking and acting on a number of workplace issues: literacy, job training, investigation of concerns, involvement of employees, the steps in project planning and the sources and uses of power in organizations.

Respondents had a lot in common in terms of the benefits of the collaborative process. There was more diversity however, in the challenges they faced. These challenges seemed to grow out of a distinctive organizational structure, set of relationships or history of practice. These challenges can alert us to the tensions, surprises and demands inherent in the process. We would do well to recognize and examine them so our work continues to evolve.

IV. Benefits to Committee Members

Experienced people have more of a base and are more receptive.

An unexpected trend in the discussion of benefits is that the more related experience people have, the more they learn in the collaborative process. While I expected those with no previous experience to make the most significant significant leaps of learning, in fact the opposite is true. Generally, those new to any type of committee work make some first steps in acquiring skills and becoming aware of how their organization works. In contrast, those with experience are able to reflect on their past practice, deepen their understanding of how the process works and integrate important elements of our collaborative work into their own context. At first I was hesitant about asking seasoned committee members what they had gained. What could they possibly have learned? Then I realized that my conversations with them would yield the most thoughtful and insightful commentary.

My own personal learning has been enormous. I believe in it.

I'd never spoken in a room with more than 5 people. Now there were 46.

The two most frequently mentioned benefits for both new and seasoned committee members are:

- increasing their knowledge about and skills for process and project work
- working with others in a new style of teamwork

A. Increase in Knowledge and Skills for Process Work

Learning a new approach was an incredible opportunity. Personally a new beginning for me.

One goal of our thorough, step-by-step needs assessment and evaluation process is to provide a training opportunity for committees, especially for experienced members. The process leaves a legacy for individuals and for organizations. Some people discover through their hard work how to organize these grand efforts while others single out certain steps in the process which open up new avenues for learning.

The WNA was a big learning experience for me. Usually we just do it with management. Bang! Going through the process has to be done and now we can see the future.

"Developing a project from scratch and putting issues and tasks in order... is a good example of how to plan... and a big learning experience for me." Many others appreciate getting to the big picture. The overall process is a "new approach," "an opportunity to rethink the whole operation," or a chance to learn "how to organize nation-wide."

These members see how they can use or adapt the model in their own current and future work: in building community support for projects, in providing a framework for professionals to work together, in designing a national operations audit, in evaluating the company's programs, and in mounting other projects through a joint process.

Management noticed a big improvement on my part when I stood up and gave presentations.

Specific steps in our process provide opportunities for people to learn and practice skills. In the needs assessment process members highlight the following skill areas:

- interviewing skills for the assessment process as well as for hiring teachers
- in-depth knowledge and practice for leading focus groups, especially questioning and scribing
- oral presentations to large groups

I typically work alone but I learned to talk in a bigger crowd and jump right in. I learned to be a player and not just stir things up.

Insights gained from evaluation steps include:

- be clear and up front about the goals of the project
- evaluate from goals
- decide how to measure success: not by cost but by what people are able to do

Many other skills that people gained will enable them to be active and resourceful participants in any group effort:

It's a good process and everyone takes it with them even if they have gone on to other places.

- running effective meetings by keeping the group moving
- delegating responsibility
- coordinating and managing a project
- resolving conflicts
- using a language common to everyone to achieve unity
- listening to people and allowing everyone to have a voice

For the long term I learned how to let people say what they need to say and how to pay attention on a conscious level.

In all, the committee work opens up fresh ground for learning and action. One member, an experienced leader and organizer in his community, says he gained company-centred leadership skills: "I am more aware of my skills and my role now."

B. A New Style of Working Together

We went beyond our hesitant relationships with each other. We developed a true partnership based on trust where everyone believed in what we were doing.

The most striking incidents of successful teamwork are with committees which overcame traditional adversarial relationships to work together. One person describes these working relationships as "refreshing" when "issues of importance to a great number of people can bring [us] together without politics and personality clashes." Another feels that, "We developed friendships that are not normal. We got to know each other as people...and even go out for lunch or a beer together."

We were all equals at the table. Not that [the company] always works that way but sometimes it's good to work that way.

It brings common unity with organizations of all shapes and sizes.

For other committee members in large organizations or community-based projects, the WEC process offers a group setting unlike any other. They meet as equals and learn how to work together, with colleagues they would not normally associate with or may not even know. They learn how to deal with different opinions, formed by different knowledge and experience of the same issues. They find a "common unity" across one organization or across several working together for a common purpose. In some cases, this communal support on a single cause can transform individuals and relationships. In other cases, people develop tolerance just to get the job done. In all cases, people "grow and learn."

The energy of the 16 groups made the total committee more powerful than the individual groups. The committee process really reinforced the need for community participation and support throughout the entire program.

In most settings, this collaborative work marks a new way of working together. For one small company where everyone knows each other, the workplace needs assessment (WNA) was the first time a joint committee worked to a deadline, produced a program plan and got an overwhelming response. The process changes people and organizations by intervening in an established social context. As the process is shaped by the committee members to fit their context, so also are the members and the organization affected by the thinking, creativity and action steps in the process.

C. Personal Benefits

"A tremendous boost of confidence!" Surprisingly, it is mostly experienced people who mention the shot of self-confidence they gain in collaborative work. They have "the opportunity to make a difference" and to expand their notions of what might be possible in their communities and in their workplaces. They may find a mentor who guides them through practice and reflection or make important contacts for future projects.

I always learn and grow by working with others.

On the whole, they make positive gains personally and enjoy the experience of working together. Some even have "lots of fun!"

D. Becoming Aware of Issues in an Organization

Our committee work enables people to uncover and then tackle issues that are often endemic to an organization. They also have the opportunity to "discuss things on a far-reaching basis," as one person said, rather than "just giving it immediate coverage."

Generally, inexperienced members mention their new awareness of issues, problems and "all the aspects" of their organization. Those with experience are usually aware of such issues; a few say they are able to understand them from a different perspective – that of the hourly worker or union member. For example, in the case of an organization which had recently merged, experienced people comment on the chance to "hear about the structures, issues and the mentality of the two [groups]." The committee structure created a forum for both groups to reveal their operations in a de-politicized atmosphere.

We became a lot more aware of all the problems across the country. Things brought up at the table were very illuminating to all members.

E. Literacy in the Workplace

One of the biggest "learnings"... more cooperation between literacy agencies and industry and setting up proactive programs. I've learned a lot about the issues and I'm behind the scenes encouraging lots of people.

Finally, the collaborative committee process brings literacy and broader basic skills issues to the fore. Again, only experienced people talk about this awareness as they integrate their new knowledge about literacy into what they already know about their organizations. As industry training moves toward self-directed learning and away from relying on personal contact, the role of basic skills becomes more crucial. One committee member who feels strongly about industry recognizing this role sees the reciprocal nature of his work. He brings industry knowledge to providers on his committee and at the same time he brings his new understanding of basic skills to management "because they have to understand it too."

Others broaden their definition of literacy and of who might want more skills. "It's not just reading and writing....I was surprised by the women who want to learn computers for home."

For an experienced literacy educator, her committee work was a kind of training we may not normally envision: "I learned about workplace literacy and its totally different premises from community literacy. Literacy people need this training. It's a real way to make money."

V. Benefits to Organizations and Communities

The documentation of our program as history is important for our community.

As our committee members grow into the collaborative process, their excitement and experience is passed on to their colleagues and into their communities. They initiate a committee style approach to addressing other issues and use steps of the process in other departments, programs and community efforts. A collaborative process spreads to other sites as more skilled workers and administrators develop their skills to "make organizations excellent."

Some specific impacts on organizations and communities mentioned by committee members include:

- growth of a different culture in the company – a cooperative one that involves everyone
- peer training, "which could never have been introduced without a successful WNA"
- adoption of an evaluation process based on the achievement of goals
- an operations audit which builds on WNA issues
- expansion of the Effective Reading in Context (ERIC) program to include writing and oral presentations – costs covered by the company
- use of training tax to cover basic skills courses and the development of a warehouse certificate program
- WNA and pilot programs become models for other companies in the community

Our company knows a lot more about itself.

Committee members recount with pride how WNA's and basic skills programs have made a difference in their workplaces. In one company, once employees saw a program running, "there was a general attitude change on the floor." Companies and unions begin to understand and seriously address "basic skills issues that they didn't see before." In two companies where previous basic skills programs had faltered, committee members saw a new energy and commitment to the program after plant involvement in the WNA.

Our committee opened up everyone's eyes. It affected people. It's not about equipment or methods but people-oriented. The most rewarding of all committees.

Ultimately, of course, all the committees' efforts support their co-workers in learning and growing. Not only are there opportunities for people to gain confidence and skills in "learning situations geared to adults," but people also become more knowledgeable about their company and their union, are better able to defend their rights and contribute actively within and outside their organizations.

VI. Resources to Support Committee Work

A. The Mix that Makes it all Work

Everyone came from different sites and aspects of the company. People brought their own riches. We all gave our insights and helped everyone understand the big picture.

Each committee has its own rhythm, internal drive and operating dynamic formed by the mix of people present and the context of the organization. Our efforts to get representation from as many levels, sites and groups of an organization as possible, contribute to that dynamic and its positive outcomes. The most commonly stated resource available to the committee was the breadth of experience of the group or "the mix that makes it all work."

We all had different views of how things would evolve for us. But it all came together in a national scope and plan.

We were learning, listening and compromising.

It was a real eye opener for many to hear about empowerment at [one of our locals].

Collaborative work draws specifically on that experience and uses it to inform planning, outreach, and the drafting and acceptance of recommendations for action. The mixture of perspectives spans not only union, management, workers and providers but also those with experience in project organizing at work or at the community level and those who are taking the first step toward involvement. While one person may know about adult learning systems, another knows about what she and her co-workers really want from education. While one member understands management's vision and knows how to get proposals endorsed, another has extensive networks within the rank and file. These views and roles "cover all the angles." Just as importantly through their collaboration, members can move beyond their own perceptions, learn more about their own organization and embrace the variety and complexity of their workplace or community.

B. Funds to Support Committee Efforts

All of the committees received some form of financial support from a government, the company, or a donation of services. In addition to ABC CANADA, skills centres, for instance, have donated their services. Government funds from the NLS or from provincial ministries assisted some committees as did some companies which provided money for travel, advertising, refreshments and T-shirts or mugs. Companies are also responsible for freeing up members of the committee for meetings and providing backup support.

C. Enthusiasm and Passion

People are passionate about making a difference in other people's lives.

People cared. Everyone really cared.

Enthusiasm, excitement and a passion for change bond groups together. The excitement of "becoming part of decision-making" and "seeing a project through to the end" helps to carry the committees forward. For many members this combination of collegiality and purpose is groundbreaking and generates enthusiastic commitment. In some cases, the committees lay down deep roots. As one person says: "The overall vision is still there and most of the people and our community groups are there for support." In other cases, while the group no longer operates as one committee, the individuals have taken that experience of making change into their communities and other parts of their organization.

D. Leadership

Leadership within the committee is also valued for maintaining commitment to goals, keeping people informed and guiding the group in how to proceed. Members cite various leaders: individuals who champion the cause, union leaders, members of skills centres which bridge union, management and community, and the WEC facilitators.

VII. Challenges in Committee Work

Two of the challenges committees face were first cited by members as benefits: teamwork and communicating about literacy issues. Working through these difficulties proves to be a rewarding aspect of the process as well as a transforming one.

A. Teamwork

The challenges of creating a collaborative committee are many:

We needed everyone's support. The whole process brought us together. It's so rare for a committee to be all on the same page.

- diverse groups - can municipal executives get along with an assembly line manufacturing team?
- different goals - how do we agree on a set of goals that satisfies everyone in different sites and positions?

- no base of common experience - how do we go from nothing especially when we don't know what we are getting into?
- adversarial relationships - how do we leave politics, personalities and history at the door?
- overall recommendations - how do we come to agreement on recommendations that include different sectors and different industries?

I always believed in it but now I know it. Our strength is in the people out there.

How do committees overcome these obstacles? Committee members point to the absence of egos and obstructionists and the presence of a desire to do something positive for co-workers, the company, the union and the community. The enthusiasm and excitement cited earlier as well as instructive leadership all contribute to getting the job done.

B. Literacy Issues

One difficulty of committee participation is in understanding the pervasiveness of literacy issues and bringing them to the fore for serious discussion. This challenge can resurface as one of the benefits of committee work. Some groups find they have to struggle to establish the value of education for personal development and not just for workplace training. Connecting the fulfillment of personal goals in basic skills education to long term company training goals has proved successful. When training budgets are available, the next challenge is to secure on-going funds for basic skills. Successful committee members are strong champions for literacy with knowledge of the issues and creative ideas for incorporating literacy into the workplace. As well, they have good connections to decision-makers in management.

Never that understanding of the role of basic skills at the industry level.

C. Time and Perseverance

"It takes time." Time to get the committee working cooperatively, to get people freed up to plan, to survey employees, to "get people to believe in it and trust in what the committee is doing." Once the trust is established, committees must develop perseverance to see the project through, to "keep the initiative going" especially after slowdowns or changes in leadership and key personnel.

It takes time. From everyone's perspective it seems forever but we were working full out.

Committee members are surprised by how much time and effort the process involves yet none would dismiss it. Gradually they become aware that workplace education is part of an ongoing process – building the human infrastructure of an organization.

Perseverance: but now we have a second wind and 5 pilot projects.

D. Roles, Responsibilities and Relationships to Senior Management

In large projects involving many sites, departments or large numbers of employees, an accepted definition of roles and responsibilities for the committee and the organization (even levels within the organization) seems essential. Responsibility for certain activities such as final decision-making and communication to all levels must be assigned.

Active representation from senior management and union leadership on committees gives more direct access to the decision-makers and ensures that they understand the basic skills issues. Members who did not have senior people on their committees say progress was slow, employee interest was low or the committee's efforts misunderstood. In one case, senior management did not give their stated approval of the questions asked in a needs assessment (there was no active and consistent representative on the committee) and the committee became isolated within a large hierarchical structure. The "little people can't be seen to be taking over" - stirring up employees, raising questions and expectations, and making decisions without commitment from above.

Some people were not in positions of power to make the decisions that were necessary. The support of upper management has become very important.

In this case the member recommended that the committee "may have to let go and send recommendations off to those who can move on them." The committee may have to see its role as "a resource and not necessarily the doers always. They can go on to other things in the organization."

The committee has a life as long or as short as you chose....They don't have to do it all....They can be a resource and make a difference in a variety of locations.

Getting buy-in: understanding and appreciation from senior management.

In some cases senior management needs tangible evidence of how the company can be better off at the end. In other cases committees may find themselves in a standoff if management insists on revising the report for its own ends. Assumptions and expectations shift throughout the process and need to be revisited frequently as the committee reaches out to all levels of an organization.

We wanted to be equal partners, not subordinates.

Context determines the challenges and helps to shape the solutions. In a site where the union and the company had a history of strong opposition, the union insisted that they had to gain "functional authenticity," that is equal authority to management in setting up the process, assigning the budget and carrying out the plans. In multi-site organizations, members have had difficulty getting employee involvement if management is not aware of, committed to or promoting the project.

E. Other Challenges

You learn to work with others and learn that there is always a solution somewhere.

Overcoming geographic distances and maintaining consistency and continuity in committee membership are also challenges, especially in large scale projects. Timing seems to be more crucial in these projects where coordination of the committees' efforts with the on-going activities of the organizations needs full attention throughout. Yet, despite these obstacles which often cannot be overcome at the time, the work is completed although with higher levels of stress and frustration.

VIII. Conclusion

The best conclusion to this report may in fact be one of the challenges mentioned by a committee member: the need for outreach. Those who work in the field of basic skills must reach out to literacy providers and industry and engage them in discussions of forward-looking education initiatives for organizations and their communities. As we link the communities, the workplaces, and the educators together, the circles of collaborative work extend and deepen for greater benefits and richer lives.

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